**WIDE-EYED FAITH**
**June 6, 2004**

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**Psalm 34:1–10**
**Luke 24:13–31**

**"When he was at table with them,**
**he took bread, blessed and broke it,**
**and gave it to them.**
**Then their eyes were opened,**
**and they recognized him."**
**Luke 24:30–31 (NRSV)**

*The Fortieth President of the United States of America, Ronald Reagan, died yesterday, and it is appropriate this morning that we, as a congregation of God's people in this nation, pause to remember him, give thanks for his life and service to our nation.*

*We thank you, O God, for the life of Ronald Reagan and for his service to our nation. We thank you for his hopefulness and embrace of values of kindness, optimism, and strength. We thank you for the role he played during a critical moment in world history. And now, as we commend him to your eternal care, we pray for his wife and family. May they know the comfort of your love, from which nothing in life or death can separate us: through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*So startle us again, O God, with your truth and speak your word to us, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sixty years ago today, thousands of American and Canadian and British and French young men waded ashore on the Normandy coast of France in the largest and most remarkable military invasion in the history of the world. Its purpose was not to exact revenge or acquire territory or riches. It was to liberate human beings from oppression. The only thing we asked in return, Secretary of State Colin Powell said, was small parcels of earth, a few acres, to bury our dead. Ten thousand died that day. Thousands more would die. Before it was over 400,000 Americans would give their lives.

The event is remembered humbly and gratefully today and their sacrifice honored.

It was a defining moment for our nation. Historians remind us that we did not enter World War II voluntarily, but reluctantly. In fact, isolationism was the strongest political dynamic. In the presidential election of 1940, both candidates, Republican Wendell Wilkie and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, promised to keep us out of Europe's war. The mood of the nation was isolationist, noninvolvement in the rest of the world, safety and security in "fortress America." You might say that the American public shut its eyes to what was happening in the rest of the world. December 7, 1941, and June 6, 1944—two dates forever permanently changed that.

The mood of the churches, denominations, theological seminaries, and university divinity schools was similar. The unspeakable horror of World War I, the slaughter of a whole generation of German, French, and British young men even before we entered the war and our young people began to die, had produced a widespread revulsion for all war and a wave of isolationism in the churches and pacifism in the seminaries and divinity schools.

In fact, the *Christian Century,* the leading ecumenical journal of theology and culture, where I am privileged to spend a little time these days, was strongly isolationist and pacifist. One voice was raised to challenge the prevailing view and to suggest that faithfulness means involvement in the world, not isolation from it. It was the strong voice of Reinhold Niebuhr, a professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Niebuhr's student, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a gentle pacifist, took the last boat back to his native Germany and moved all the way from pacifism and noninvolvement to participate in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler precisely because his mind had changed and he had concluded that he could not, in faith, remain aloof and secure from the travail of his country.

Niebuhr began to write and speak about the responsibility Christian people and Christian churches have to be radically involved in the world, not withdrawn from it. He talked about the morality of involvement and intervention.

The question Reinhold Niebuhr wrestled with and put to Christian people and Christian churches was this: What do we have to do with the life of the world? Can we risk getting our hands dirty? Should we risk involvement? "The question," he said, "was how to behave responsibly in an evil, morally ambiguous and compromised world." "We might as well dispense with the Christian faith entirely if it is our conviction that we can act in history only if we are guiltless," he said (Elisabeth Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politis in Times of Peace and War*). The one thing Christians must not do is abandon the world, retreat from the world.

The temptation has always been to do just that. When things get rough in the world, or dirty, or dangerous, or morally ambiguous, to withdraw, to flee for safety to the monastery, the church—our fortress—or to withdraw intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually from the world and to practice our faith privately, internally—our "spirituality" and to mean by that a sacred space in our lives, untouched, unsoiled, unaffected by the life of the world.

Jürgen Moltmann is a German theologian now approaching the end of his career. He and his wife, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, have written a book together, *Passion for God.* Moltmann served in the German army, where he narrowly escaped death as a seventeen-year-old soldier and spent three years in a POW camp, where he became a Christian. In 1948, he and his wife began theological study, and Moltmann began a lifelong quest: Where is God in this sometimes beautiful, sometimes ugly, sometimes noble, and sometimes ghastly world of ours? And his answer, forged at the foot of the cross, was and is "here": God is here, right in the middle of this world, not some other world. And here, right in the middle of this world, is where God's people must be.

One of his chapters in the book is entitled, delightfully, "Praying with Open Eyes." In it Moltmann playfully observes that the conventional body language of prayer is distinctly otherworldly:

> People who pray no longer belong properly to the world at all. They already have one foot in the world beyond. . . . We close our eyes and look into ourselves, so to speak. We fold our hands. We kneel down and lower our eyes—even cast ourselves down with faces on the ground. Why do we shut our eyes? Don't we need much more prayer with open eyes and raised heads? (pp. 57–58)

Moltmann suggests that the conventional posture of prayer—eyes closed, head lowered, hands folded—is a metaphor for the practice of Christian faith.

That is what I was taught somewhere along the line, long ago. It was a little song we sang: "Be Careful." The tune is a favorite of the Wrigley Field organist whenever a little amusement and crowd involvement is appropriate. The words I remember are

> Be careful little eyes what you see.
> Be careful little eyes what you see.
> The Father up above is looking down in love,
> So be careful little eyes what you see.

It goes on:

Be careful little ears what you hear,
Be careful little feet where you go,
Be careful little hands what you do.

Translate that “It’s an evil, threatening world out there. Better to stay home, keep your hands folded and eyes shut.”

The earliest Christians prayed standing up, looking up, with outstretched arms and wide-open eyes, as if they were expecting something or someone.

To have faith is to have your eyes open. It is to be awake and alive to the world. To have faith is to embrace and live thoroughly in the world God made and has given to us, the world God loves so much, the world God’s own Son loved and for which he died. To have Christian faith is to live like he did, which is to say, thoroughly in the world: to love the world deeply, to love its beauty, the soft air of a June morning, the dramatic power of a lightning storm over the lake. To have faith is to love being part of this world: to rejoice in its colors and sounds and tastes and sensations. To have Christian faith is to be awake and alive to others: to our dearest ones, our families and friends. It is to be open and vulnerable, to feel and experience the suffering of others as Jesus did: never to isolate and avoid and retreat but to live in and with and among the precious others with whom we share this earth, this city, this community for a few decades of time.

That is what Jesus taught two of his disciples one day. They were walking along an ordinary, dusty road to the little village of Emmaus. As a matter of fact, they were walking to get away from the ambiguity and disappointment and tragedy of life. Their friend and Lord, Jesus of Nazareth, had been cruelly executed. The world had been the world in all its unfeeling cruelty and harshness, snuffing out his sweet life in an instant, like blowing out a candle. So they hid, locked the door, pulled back as far as they could, and two of them said, “Let’s go for a walk.”

Along the road, a dusty road leading away from life’s ambiguity and tragedy, leading nowhere in particular, he came to them, and walked with them and talked to them, and when he broke the bread and gave it to them, their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

Those of us who love this church and this neighborhood and this city are thinking a lot these days about the relationship of the church and its neighborhood, its mission presence and its physical presence. Next Sunday morning, the members of this congregation will have the opportunity to vote on whether or not we should translate an asset, our air rights, into financial strength for the future. Some of our members and neighbors are opposed to a new high rise in the neighborhood. If the congregation approves, we will

have to make our case before the Planning Commission and City Council and so will our neighbors. And while there is nothing about our faith in God and trust in Jesus Christ that dictates how we should vote, I do think it is important to note that we are talking about this matter out of our love for the world and our long tradition of involvement in the life of the world immediately around us. Some suggest that a church ought not to get involved in something as worldly and ambiguous as real estate development. But we are here—in this world, this neighborhood, this city—not somewhere else. And we have chosen to live deeply and faithfully here, to open our doors daily to all who seek shelter, hope, food, encouragement, a place to sit and pray; we have chosen to reach out to the homeless poor, the elderly, the children. We have chosen to live with our eyes open and our hearts and our arms and our hands.

However we decide, may we be clear about one thing—and that is that God calls us to live thoroughly in this world, to never withdraw or retreat from the world even at its most risky and ambiguous.

I love something William Sloane Coffin said about the church:

> Most Church boats don't like to be rocked: they prefer to lie at anchor rather than go places on stormy seas. But that's because we Christians view the Church as the object of our love instead of the subject and instrument of God's. Faith cannot be passive: it has to go forth—to assault the conscience, excite the imagination. (*Credo,* pp. 140–141)

And so we go forth in the days ahead, as a congregation of God's people to live as thoroughly and as faithfully as we know how in this world, in the promise that God loves the world and wants us to be in it in his Son's name.

"In the breaking of bread their eyes were opened and they recognized him," the Bible says. In the common, ordinary, everyday life of this world, the friendships, the encounters, the shared tasks and shared meals, the laughter, the joy, the worry and pain and grief—in all of it he promises to meet us.

One of my favorite few sentences are these by Frederick Buechner:

> Sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are often everyday moments, the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears, reveal only . . . a stranger coming down the road behind us, a meal like any other meal. But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with our being and imagination . . . what we may see is Jesus himself.

Or as the psalmist said, centuries before:

O, taste and see that the Lord is good.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.